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jenny hval

Sally Rylett interviews the musician about her latest release Apocalypse, Girl.

The *Apocalypse, Girl* LP was released earlier this month. How do you feel this record is different from your previous work? Are there any new directions or areas you've explored with this album?

I've explored new spiritual and musical territory, I think. It's an album where I've explored lots of ideas about space and synth textures, without going anywhere or hardly playing anything so it's a place for the really big ideas spoken with a very soft voice. It's also much more processed and elecronically treated than anything I've done before, which is the way I like to work on my own – editing, looping, digging out textures in little sounds or background noises. It's like a horror movie made with a magnifying glass.

That *Battle Is Over* criticises contemporary society and 'how we take care of ourselves'. What would you say your motivation behind this song is?

The backing track of the song was meant to be a safe and steady beat that I could do a karaoke-like rant over. It's not meant as to-the-point criticism. The lyrics are phrases taken from various experiences, discussions, conversations, and placed in a musical context where I could explore the emotional content of them in a performance. *That Battle* became a rant

about social and ideological loneliness, a loneliness we're given by the system that constantly puts the blame on individuals and weakening us. But this rant is also a place where voices can meet, because we can put these words in our mouths, spit them out again and then kill them with a long, dark drone at the end. It's an apocalyptic take on the capitalist structures that imposes itself on us.

For this album and your future releases, you are working with the American label Sacred Bones Records for worldwide distribution. How have you found working with a record label outside of your home country, and playing with artists from from more international backgrounds?

Sacred Bones is an amazing label. They dare to work with risky music, understand and respect that music, and back it up accordingly. They don't work with one-size-fits-all pre-defined business models. Being from a really small and homogenous country makes it hard to find a place within the Norwegian music world, so for me it's been necessary to work in an international community just to feel free to create. I also find it important to engage with people from other backgrounds, to constantly challenge where I come from and see beyond that experience.

How has your recent touring with the likes of St Vincent and Perfume Genius been reflected in your music and the visual art you've incorporated into the shows?

I think it's been crucial for me to work with the two American artists Zia Anger and Annie Bielski. To work with visual artists onstage - and those being two incredibly talented women from very different backgrounds than me - has made me see the music and concepts I work with from a totally different perspective. I can't really explain it too well yet, but it's been a wonderful experience so far.

You have a background in performance, creative writing and music, elements of which can be heard in your music, for example as you shift between spoken word and melodic singing. How has the combination of these various backgrounds influenced you?

In the most natural way. Everyone has different backgrounds that influences their work. I would say, though, that the way these elements appear in my music are probably more a reflection of who I am as a person than a particular academic background. When I studied writing, I got more out of stream-of-consciousness and surrealism than carefully constructed novels, and when I studied theatre I got more into Heiner Müller than Ibsen. And on top of that, I used music, which I didn't study, as an extracurricular activity where I could combine the academic and the emotional. Other students at the same school also composed music, but more calmly and separately from their academic school work. I guess I always wanted to combine everything into one expression.

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Heather O'Donnell interviews Sophie Elliott of Parallel, a quarterly women's magazine looking at life through a feminist lens.

For TYCI readers who don't know of Parallel yet, could you tell us a bit about what you do and your aims for the project?

Parallel is a new quarterly women's magazine which I created with the intention of providing women with more of an option when it came to their magazine options. Instead of being stuck with the myriad of contradictory magazines that preach one thing (such as body positivity, or solidarity with women of colour) then depict another (such as only stick-thin models, or using no women of colour in their fashion spreads), I wanted to produce something that was upfront, honest, made by women for women. I put together a team which now has around 25 members, and since about November last year we've been working on the magazine. So far in Parallel we have discussed a huge variety of subjects, like porn, sex, bodily functions, periods, gender, sexuality, disability, mental illness, media representation, body positivity, and more. We've also talked to a lot of amazing women about their achievements and experiences. We really just want to inspire and encourage women to get involved and to educate themselves on these important social and political subjects.

How did your idea for the magazine come together?

I initially came up with the vague idea for the magazine way back whilst I was still in uni, but when I was discussing it, it was more of a joke than anything. I didn't think I'd actually be able to turn it into reality. About a year after graduating I was getting fed

up of being stuck in jobs that I hated and not being able to apply for journalism roles because I didn't have any journalistic experience. I was also super wary about applying for internships at women's magazines because I knew that a lot of the stuff they published would contradict my own personal ethics and opinions. It's all very well being a pro-woman magazine but when your advertising and editorials strive off of making women feel awful, I'm not interested. So I decided to create my own magazine! It meant I could gain the work experience I needed, and that I could produce content I was truly happy with putting out there. So I put out a call for volunteers on my blog and it went from there! It was really great being able to handpick the team as well because it meant I knew that everyone had the same way of thinking and that everyone viewed the mass media in the same way. We all have one common goal, and that's to kick the ass of the mainstream women's magazine industry.

Can you tell us how you launched your idea and how easy it was to turn a Kickstarter page into a reality?

We tried to build up a bit of a base before launching the Kickstarter, by setting up all of our other social networking sites and getting a few blog posts out there so people knew what we were all about. We tried to get the "brand" out there as it were. When we first launched it, we got loads of donations. Then it slowed down loads, then about halfway through picked up again - then towards the end slowed almost to a halt and we were all panicking! In the final few hours we were several thousand pounds away from our goal but a very generous backer helped push us over the edge and we actually exceeded our target.

Which aspect of women's magazines is your main desire to change?

I'm just fed up of picking up a magazine and finding that 80% of it is actually made up of advertising - advertising aimed to patronise you or make you feel rubbish - and that there are only a few articles in there. Then when you read the articles you find out that most of them are focused on men and the male gaze: how to look great for your man, top sex tips, blah blah blah. How much of a traditional, mainstream women's magazine is focussed on women and female pleasure and actually loving yourself and the women around you? How much of a traditional, mainstream women's magazine is about fighting for your rights and fighting for women around the world? How many women's magazines talk about politics, or women in STEM fields, or any other subject that is not considered typically "feminine"? And even when they do, they'll generally contradict it elsewhere in the same or a future issue.

THIS IS AN EXCERPT. TO READ THE FULL ARTICLE, HEAD TO TYCI.ORG.UK. FOR MORE ABOUT PARALLEL MAGAZINE, VISIT THEPARALLELMAG.COM.

ANDREA GIBSON

Heather O'Donnell caught up with the poet and activist at their Glasgow CCA show in May.

I love the line in Jellyfish *"I'll tell you these poems, they are my birth marks"*. When thinking about the need to write and share our stories it's a really inspiring comparison. Can you tell me a bit about when you first started writing poetry?

You know when you first start writing at school and you get the little callus? I was five years old and I remember running home and telling my mother that my hand was changing shape to prove that I was a writer. But I think that I didn't discover poetry until when I was around twelve or thirteen; I started writing a little then. In college I studied writing, but it wasn't until after college that I discovered spoken word and had that pull to be doing it all of the time. I had that feeling that I wasn't myself unless I was writing.

I read that you write to music. What music do you find works for you?

I've been writing to music for about a decade now, my writing is very metered and has always been really rhythmic. I think I probably write more similarly to the way a songwriter would than a lot of poets. I write out loud, I write running around my house. I'm not actually sitting down typing when I'm writing, I'm running around listening for

the sound and listening for how it might work with the music. I have a lot of friends who are musicians and so we'll write to each other, I might write a poem and ask them to write a song to it or vice versa. I listen to a lot of different kinds of music when I'm writing - sometimes I'll spend an entire year just writing different poems to the same song, over and over, because it's a song that works.

I also love your use of quantum imagery as a way to shake people up, and see that we are all part of this planet we are sharing; to see our common humanity. Where do you find inspiration for some of the images you create with your poems, as they seem to resonate with so many people?

Sometimes if I'm walking around that day, I'll just write down things that I see, random things that might seem like they don't connect but when I go through the writing process I try to find places where those things do connect. I was doing an interview recently where they asked me a lot about my relationship with God. It was interesting because I talk a lot about God in my poems, but I never really know what I mean by God. I think something in my spiritual beliefs that I'm constantly always forming it's about the places where we all connect and where all things connect. And I guess I most often think of that as God. So I guess just thinking of two things that we might not necessarily assume have anything in common and then finding the things that do.

There's been a real surge in spoken word scenes in the last couple of years. What do you think about this generation and their ability to make change happen?

I think some of positivity is just being willing to have moments of feeling absolutely hopeless and just giving yourself that, and using that as a place to bounce back from. I've always leaned towards the side of hope, and I think hope as a concept is not much without the action between it. People create what's possible. I'm almost forty now and typically the shows that I do most of the audience are twenty years younger than me. I learn so much from each show, when I read a poem on stage someone will come up after me and tell me what might have been problematic with it. They'll teach me something about what I've been talking about that I didn't know before. And I feel so consistently inspired by people, especially young people. I do feel positive, and with spoken word, the act of telling our stories is so healing. Just the revealing of ourselves and specifically the reminding other people that they're not alone in what they're feeling. Every time you tell a story about yourself or about your life you give somebody else permission to tell theirs too and if that all dominos, I think something beautiful happens.

Do you have any advice for those wanting to get into activism but unsure where to start?

There are so many places! I would say paying attention to what moves you and what your strengths are. The ways that you feel you could most

contribute; we all contribute in different ways and there are things that lots of people do that I would never be able to pull off. So just tapping into where you have the most to contribute. And that might change every year. What will also change is your passions, what really moves you emotionally. And to just go through life with the idea of being of service; offering something to the world that contributes to it being more gentle than it is now. And just paying attention, I think there's so much we can look at and get gloomy about but spending time paying attention to what people are doing that's really awesome and having faith in the hearts of people. So taking the time to pay attention is in itself really aspiring. The art of giving is not really a selfless thing, because it's so helpful to you too.

How do you prepare yourself mentally for public speaking? I feel like moving away from focus on the self, which is what your poetry does surely helps, but I am still in awe of your amazingly calm and powerful delivery.

I do get stage fright and I have for fifteen years. I'm a nervous public speaker, which is funny. I've been trying to write a screenplay about people who do things for a living that they're terrified of. I heard once that the amount of nervousness you get for a public speaking event is equivalent to the amount of respect you have for it. So whenever I'm up on stage and I'm shaking I'm thinking, 'oh wow, I'm shaking with respect!' The thing I think that has helped me the most on stage is just deciding to let the poem fill me up and let the

poem live, and just channel my energy into the poem.

I can't wait to read your book Pansy. For anyone who doesn't know, can you tell us a bit about it?

I self identify as a pansy in terms of it being a play on gender and my friends have been calling me a pansy in a really sweet way for years. I like the idea of feeling like a pansy - so it's sort of taking a gentle crack at anyone who might use that as an insult ever and also twisting it on gender a little bit. My friend Levi also identifies as a pansy and I have a picture of him as a little kid on the cover of the book. People always think it's me, but no it's his cute little face on there.

Which poets or fellow activists do you admire?

There are so many! The people that I've been reading recently are Danaz Smith, he's amazing you should really check him out. Claudia Rankin, Rachel McKibbins, Buddy Wakefield. Bell Hooks is actually a huge inspiration and I'm always learning from whatever she's writing. There's also the poet Mary Oliver. She writes about leaves and lichens, rivers and streams and there's so much that I think is activism in it just because it's a celebration of the earth that we live in.

What's the best part about doing what you do?

Every time I get onstage, or when I was walking around the park today sometimes I could just start crying. I mean I'm a big crier but I think I cannot believe this is what

I'm doing with my life. It was my dream years ago and just one of those distant dreams you never really thought was possible. The fact that this is what I've been doing for the last decade, driving and flying around and reading poems to people just feels like such a blessing. I would say my favourite part of it is how open hearted the people are that come to the shows. How much my heart continually opens just in having conversations with people after, or sometimes even during the shows. Recently people have just been throwing up their hand and asking a question mid show and I sort of love it when it happens, it's really sweet. You know tonight everybody is going to come here from a different day. Somebody fell in love today and somebodies grandmother passed away today and we all end up in the same room feeling what we feel. I like to be around people who are willing to feel what they feel, and so that part I think is the best.

THIS ARTICLE IS A ZINE EXCLUSIVE! TO READ OUR OTHER INTERVIEWS WITH ANDREA, HEAD TO TYCI.ORG.UK. FOR MORE ON ANDREA'S WORK, VISIT ANDREAGIBSON.ORG.

photo: Sally Jubb

Cora Bissett

Natasha Rapkin speaks to the theatre director Cora Bissett, mid way through the run of her new show Rites, a piece of verbatim theatre that explores and comments upon the difficult, emotionally-loaded topic of female genital mutilation.

Rites is carefully constructed, and it says a lot that many documentaries about FGM have not. Tell us about the process of creating it and forming the structure that it has.

Myself and Yusra Warsama spent about six months interviewing people up and down the country. We contacted people through charities, campaign groups, Scottish Refugee Council, asylum seeker groups in Glasgow and then through some of my own contacts we found midwives and doctors, layers. We'd record all the interviews, get them transcribed professionally and Yusra and I would share the recordings with each other. We ended up with about forty interviews at about two hours long each.

Yusra Warsama being of Somali background herself brought very different perspectives to the table; the animated discussion you see in the play between women round the table who have been cut but feel that the press demonise them and don't see themselves as victims - these are women Yusra knows in Cardiff. Whereas I was coming into contact with people in Scotland who are less progressed in terms of change happening in their community - people who had just discovered what this is and did feel horrified and victimised. So our different backgrounds brought a real richness to the piece…

When one of the characters learns about FGM and remembers she was cut as a child, she feels broken after years of thinking she was 'normal'. Do you think there's something problematic about using the word 'mutilation' or is it necessary in order to get the point across that it is a categorically violent act?

In one of our post show discussions, someone on the panel said the term 'female genital mutilation' had been invented by a white Westerner but that was disputed by someone in the audience who thought it was a woman from a practising culture who had been cut who coined the term. Whichever is correct, it's a very deliberate word choice. Personally I think it's important to differentiate because calling it 'circumcision' is misleading and associates it with what happens to men. Men who've been circumcised don't suffer nearly as much on-going psychological and physical problems, although I don't agree with male circumcision either - but it doesn't have the same lasting impact, so to use the same word for both acts is not appropriate. It's blurring over the issue to call it 'circumcision' - but calling it 'mutilation' enforces the idea that a wrong has been done by one person to another person and it does impose a kind of Western notion of right and wrong, but I think it is probably necessary to make the distinction. It needs to be described as an act that has been imposed upon you.

Media figures and comedians such as Bridget Christie have joined the campaign against FGM. Do you think the more high profile it is the better? What can the average person do to help?

I think raising awareness can only do good. I don't know if you're aware of the online petition started by Fahma Mohamed last year to force Michael Gove, the then education secretary, to make it mandatory for schools to educate their pupils about FGM before the summer. Up until then what happened was that the teachers feel they'd be trespassing a cultural divide by even mentioning it. So Fahma's idea was to make it across the board so that all schools are clued up with teachers that know how to approach it. That got massive media coverage in the Guardian and hundreds of thousands of people supported it. I know another case where a teacher, on whom one of the characters in the play is based on, was organising a school horse-riding trip and one of the girls said she couldn't go because she'd been cut. That teacher then started an after-hours school group where girls affected by FGM could go along and talk about it in a way that they felt comfortable. So I think giving people a platform is better than going, "Oh my God, let's lift the cover on this heinous practise!" For me I think the more public something becomes, the less mystifying and taboo, the better.

RITES RAN AT THE TRAVERSE THEATRE IN EDINBURGH UNTIL 30 MAY. THIS IS AN EXCERPT. TO READ THE FULL ARTICLE, HEAD TO TYCI.ORG.UK. FOR MORE INFORMATION ON FGM, CHECK OUT ORGANISATIONS LIKE FGM AWARE, THE SCOTTISH REFUGEE COUNCIL, DIGNITY ALERT RESEARCH FORUM, FORWARD AND ACTION AID.

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